The Study of Religion in Graduate Degree Programs: Opportunities and Structural Issues

Michael E. Cafferky

Southern Adventist University, mcafferky@southern.edu

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The Study of Religion in Graduate Degree Programs

Opportunities and Structural Issues
In this article, I will discuss several questions that get at the heart of the distinctive purpose of Seventh-day Adventist graduate education: How should we integrate faith and learning in these programs? Should we require the study of religion in all graduate-degree programs? If so, should this always take the form of a required religion course taught by a religion professor? What other options might be available to ensure that Adventist graduate education achieves both its academic and spiritual goals?

Comparatively little has been written on how to structure integration of faith and learning in Adventist graduate education. This article explores the challenges and provides a framework for exploring the advantages and shortcomings of various approaches.

The Opportunity

The need to integrate biblical faith into Seventh-day Adventist graduate education has never been greater. Every school term represents an opportunity either gained or lost to connect learning and faith. The more we can ensure that faith informs and interacts with the academic disciplines, the more likely that students will think biblically and live morally when they leave our institutions. Interweaving Scripture with academic curricula in natural ways will improve both academic learning and our students’ faith. Scripture can be useful when addressing “big questions” and assumptions in a variety of disciplines. Biblical principles can be compared with various schools of thought. Scriptural narratives and biographies provide opportunities to explore ethical values and aesthetics as they interact with academic learning. The deeper we dig in order to connect the grand themes of the Bible to academic content as well as our shared experiences with students throughout the total learning environment, the stronger becomes the anchor of faith. Incorporating matters of faith into our teaching can also help expand students’ critical thinking skills.

As a faith-based community, we embrace the need to establish and nurture faith-based graduate degree programs. What are we doing to ensure that biblical principles are integrated into the various disciplines in our curricula?

Adventist graduate education desperately needs learning resources supportive of faith and learning integration at both the Master’s and doctoral levels. Unless godly scholars in various disciplines produce educational materials that address issues of faith and learning, our faculty will continue to function without adequate resources to use in this area. I would encourage our administrators to explore a variety of ways to sponsor and produce such resources in multiple languages for use worldwide.

Through its educational institutions, particularly at the graduate level, the church plays a definitive role in preparing professionals who are willing and able to take their faith into the larger arena of leadership in the public square. If Christians are to live integrated lives after graduation, their faith commitment and learning quest must inform and challenge each other while they are in school. This will help to ensure that after graduation, faith integration continues to occur not only in the areas of church life and personal devotions, but also in the crucible of the graduate’s vocation. We also must constantly seek to nurture and prepare the next generation of scholars to serve as faculty in our schools and faith. The many issues raised by the various academic disciplines are so vital and urgent that we must address them through the lens of faith.

Implementation

How can biblical faith be incorporated into the graduate curriculum? Should we require every graduate student in every discipline to complete a general religion course? Is this the best way to ensure that integration of faith and learning occurs in graduate studies? Who should teach such a class—a religion professor? A subject-area specialist? Will such a class adequately address the issues of faith that the student will encounter in his or her vocation? Or should subject-area professors receive training so that they can integrate faith and promote spiritual growth in their courses? Perhaps both approaches should be implemented?

Consider the issues raised by these questions as well as the structural challenges of the various approaches. Many religion professors do not have graduate degrees in disciplines other
than theology or religious studies. Can we reasonably expect them to find effective ways to integrate faith and learning in the graduate-level study of other disciplines? The reverse also may be true. Subject-area professors who have little formal training in religion will doubtless feel uncomfortable being required to teach a graduate course in religion. They would need sponsorship and release time to take these additional courses that would qualify them for this task. Exacerbating the problem is employment of non-Adventist adjunct professors who have little knowledge of the church's doctrines or exposure to strategies for integrating faith and learning. Thus, it is likely that a significant number of subject-area professors will face serious challenges if asked to address issues of faith in the graduate courses they teach.

Add to this the pressure to provide students with academic training to master an ever-expanding body of knowledge. If a religion course is required, either the degree program must be lengthened to accommodate it or an existing course dropped to make room for the new one. This will result in a difficult trade-off.

Finally, consider the structural constraints imposed by external accrediting bodies and the perceptions of administrators and faculty members regarding what is required for a credible graduate program. These and other questions should be discussed in the context of the fundamental structural tensions experienced in the quest to integrate faith and learning at the graduate level.

The Structural Perspective and Tradeoffs

Adventist higher education must exist concurrently in two worlds: the community of learning and the community of faith. The resulting tension highlights two fundamental concerns in defining structural options for faith and learning integration: How much influence should each of these communities exert in the teaching-learning process? What is the appropriate level of involvement for scholars from each of these communities in the teaching of religion in graduate school? The core issues are the degree of differentiation (specialization) we wish to create in the curriculum and the commitments we must make to foster integration.

Differentiation and integration are inherently inverse operations. Embedded in one is the potential for undoing the other unless both are appropriately managed. Although they are natural polar opposites, they are inseparable, which means that the tension ultimately cannot be completely resolved one way or another once and for all. It can only be managed, with attention given to both specialization and integration. To attempt to resolve the tension is to damage one or both sides of the polarity. Furthermore, this paradox exists in dynamic tension. Some people like to think of paradox management as a balancing act where we give a little to one side and a little to the other side. But the balancing metaphor does not adequately describe how to manage a tension that is not static, where there are inevitable tradeoffs regardless of the choices that are made.

Keeping in mind the challenge that managing this tension poses to the task of integration, are there any structural options that will help administrators who are defining the content of a graduate-level religion course? How can we get the benefit of subject area specialization and at the same time be successful at integration? I suggest five possible options. (See page 33.) These can be considered in terms of the degree of involvement by a professor, as shown in the following matrix. As used here, “High Involvement” is when the professor has the dominant influence in planning course content, writing the course syllabus, and managing the teaching-learning experiences. “Low Involvement” is when he or she has little direct influence in course content planning, developing course requirements and managing the teaching-learning experiences. Listed at the bottom of the matrix are examples of goals that the options are designed to achieve. (Some goals inevitably will compete with one another.)

Option 1: Offer a course in religion taught by a religion professor. The course is tailored to address the issues of other subject areas. This option might be chosen when faculty in the university’s graduate-level courses are not qualified to discuss religion topics relevant to their discipline or have no interest in developing a discipline-specific religion course. Option 1 also assumes that either (a) religion faculty can become qualified to deal with the issues of other disciplines at the graduate level or (b) it is unnecessary for religion faculty to become so qualified. Examples of this approach can be seen in the history at Loma Linda University that Gerald Winslow referred to in his 2006 article “Why the Study of Religion Belongs in Adventist Graduate Programs.”

As with the other options considered here, there are tradeoffs when choosing this course of action. The upside of this option is that a scholar who specializes in religion teaches the course. Religion scholars will bring a depth of understanding of religion but not necessarily the expertise needed to guide student inquiry in other disciplines. This option may deter scholars in other disciplines from integrating faith into their own curricula areas. Some professors may conclude that only...
This course examines such topics as worldview, spirituality, and epistemology as they relate to Christian and public education. Option 2 assumes that students and professors alike are interested in exploring issues of faith in the context of their field of inquiry. It also assumes that faith integration is not a one-way street in which biblical knowledge, theological reflection, and personal religious experience have little valid connection with academic disciplines. Further, it concludes that faculty in disciplines other than religion are qualified, or can become qualified, to deal with issues of faith in their own area of study. In Gaebelien's view, there is an assumption that the “experienced teacher who can control and interest a class in science can, out of prayerful and faithful study, interest a class in the Word of God.”15 But conversely, Option 2 also suggests that religion faculty may not be qualified or may lack interest or time to become qualified to deal with the issues of theory and practice addressed by other disciplines.

Option 3: Offer a religion course tailored to the issues of a specific academic discipline, which is team-taught by two (or more) professors, one from religion and one from the other academic discipline. This collaborative approach assumes that faculty from both religion and the other discipline will have a desire and willingness to collaborate. As in the other options, it also assumes that both students and professors are interested in exploring issues of faith in the context of their chosen academic field. An example of this approach is seen in SOWK 508 Social Work, Religion, and Spirituality, a course required of students enrolled in the School of Social Work at Walla Walla University in College Place, Washington. This course is taught by a faculty member from the School of Social Work and a professor from the School of Theology. Another approach would be to offer a course in Christian ethics, with a portion of the course allocated to a particular discipline. While it is true that ethics is important for all graduate students preparing for service, this approach limits the range of biblical material that might be relevant to a particular discipline.

The upside of this option is that professors from religion and the other subject area have high involvement in the course. The depth of scholarship may be enhanced by their collaborative effort. The downside is that, compared with the first two options, such an approach will be more expensive and difficult to schedule.

If this option is chosen, among other things, faculty members need to be selected, at least in part, based on their willingness to collaborate. In addition, administrative support and budgetary adjustments may be needed to deal with the additional costs.

Option 4: Offer a general religion course taught by a religion professor. This option assumes that faith integration will occur for students and faculty even if the big issues, assumptions, and questions of their discipline are not specifically addressed. Those advocating this option argue that a general religion course will provide a deeper understanding of the Bible and enhance the student's overall spiritual experience. This option may be chosen because of the belief that there is an insufficient number of teachers who can appropriately integrate faith and learning in the various disciplines.

This option also may be more efficient since students from a variety of disciplines can be enrolled in one course. The downside: It may implicitly foster a compartmentalized view of religion in terms of the curriculum in other disciplines. Students will not be directly challenged to think about the issues, questions, and assumptions of their discipline through the lens of Scripture. Furthermore, requiring a single graduate-level religion course will make it impossible to cover the vast amount of biblical material that might be addressed during graduate study.

If this option is chosen, professors in the various disciplines will need to find other opportunities to engage students in the issues of faith as they relate to the discipline. But, if religion professors are perceived as taking care of the faith and learning curriculum problem, it will be more difficult to convince professors in other disciplines to pursue such engagement.

Option 5: Both the community of faith and the community of scholarship have little or no involvement in the design and delivery of a religion course. This approach appears to be inconsistent with the mission of Adventist universities. Accordingly,
it probably should be rejected.

With the exception of Option 5, each option described here allows for every professor to integrate faith and learning in any particular course, class period, or assignment. Furthermore, the personal impact of the life of each instructor is an important factor in the integration of faith and learning in every discipline that cannot be forgotten when considering only the structural dimension.

Other Structural Contingencies

In addition to the options available in resolving the fundamental tensions between differentiation and integration, it is necessary to consider other structural contingencies. For example, graduate study is distinguished from undergraduate study in terms of the degree of emphasis or the degree of complexity a number of factors, including theory, research, schools of thought (perspectives), assumptions, threshold concepts (core ideas), values in practice, and pedagogy. Each plays a role in teaching and learning. Graduate studies tend to emphasize theory and research to a greater degree than classwork at the undergraduate level. These and other factors can be seen as planks in the bridge between other disciplines and religion, as shown in the illustration below.

Each teacher, whether trained in religion or another academic discipline, will have personal preferences for how to cross this bridge with students. They must be allowed the academic freedom to pursue matters of faith in a way that constitutes the best fit for their own talents, knowledge, and skills, as well as the needs of their students. Some teachers may make connections to biblical faith by emphasizing theory and religious experience. Others may approach the faith integration process by emphasizing how values can best be put into practice, or stressing the grand biblical themes that guide practice. The potential pathways across the bridge are many. Individual preferences and course- or discipline-specific elements will influence the choices made. However, every choice comes with one or more tradeoffs, since there is insufficient time in a single course to explore every possible part of the bridge that might have the potential for linking faith and student experience.

Every teacher, however, can integrate faith and learning in caring interactions with students by sharing his or her spiritual journey. Scheduling worships at the beginning of each class period and expressing a genuine interest in each student’s spiritual and emotional welfare and growth will also help to ensure that our programs are holistic and produce graduates who have grappled with the moral issues relating to their discipline.

University administrators must provide support and training to assist teachers in making these connections between their disciplines and biblical principles. Teachers can search out materials on the Internet and/or attend seminars to help them identify effective strategies to use in order to integrate faith and learning in their classes.

Conclusion

The fundamental structural tension between differentiation and integration cannot be completely resolved. It can only be
managed. We may think we have resolved the tension by making a particular choice among the options; however, no single choice is likely to bring permanent resolution.

Which option is best? The answer will emerge at each university and in every program through dialogue that considers the contingencies and how best to manage (minimize) the downside tradeoffs of each option. An assessment of the background and needs of a particular group of students may suggest the need to adapt an approach that worked well in another environment.

Hybrid approaches might seem to be the optimal solution, but they still present some challenges, since they are unlikely to permanently resolve the fundamental structural tension described in this article. Furthermore, hybrid approaches will bring their own set of tradeoffs to consider. Each teacher and the administrators of each institution will need to carefully and prayerfully study the options in order to decide which approach will work best in each situation.

Michael E. Cafferkey is The Ruth McKee Chair for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. He holds a Doctor of Business Administration (D.B.A.) degree from Anderson University Falls School of Business and a Master of Divinity degree from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. He is the author of six books, including Management: A Faith-Based Perspective (Pearson Education, Inc., 2012), a college textbook. In 2013, Dr. Cafferkey received the Johnson Award from the Christian Business Faculty Association for his scholarship contributions that promote faith integration in business education.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See, for example, Arthur R. Holmes, The Idea of a Christian College, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), p. 7. This present article assumes that there are differences between graduate and undergraduate education regarding the optimal ways of integrating faith and learning, and will address only the graduate level.

2. The term issues as used here refers to the cluster of questions, dilemmas, assumptions, and problems emerging from an area of study, which relate to or impact the core of a person’s faith, and influence the formation of his or her worldview. Accordingly, issues are not necessarily points of fact, but refer to assumptions, theories, interpretation of facts, methods, and vocational behaviors that affect a person in a social setting.


5. These two opposite views have been recognized in various fields including mathematics, biology, education, psychology, philosophy, and art. Traditionally, higher education has been on a long-term trajectory of increasing specialization of the academic disciplines. This has created greater challenges in how to integrate learning across the disciplines. I am arguing here that the same fundamental tension exists when considering issues of faith and learning. In the field of organization theory, much has been written on this fundamental tension experienced by every organization in every sector of society including religious nonprofit organizations. See Paul R. Lawrence and Jay W. Lorsch, Organization and Environment: Managing Differentiation and Integration (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1967); Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978); Richard H. Hall and Pamela S. Tolbert, Organizations: Structures, Processes, and Outcomes, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005); Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

6. Competing goals are not unusual in complex organizations and especially in nonprofit organizations. Indeed, the goals of differentiation are, to a degree, in competition with the goals of integration.


8. This review of positive and negative effects of the various options is not intended to be comprehensive. The validity and relevance of some of the points raised here will vary, depending on the contingencies of particular situations.


